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ABSTRACT

The role of the university in providing leadership to a changing society is discussed. It is proposed that the university has a limited but important purpose of learning and teaching, scholarship and research, and that seeking to lead or change or improve the world should be done only within the setting of education. Although individuals can act privately to change society, the university should not serve as a direct agent in this process. The university's mission is an objective search for truth and the teaching of that truth. Course offerings should involve a level of understanding and a depth of ideas appropriate to a university; the fact that society requires some skill or training does not mean automatically that the university is the institution that must serve society and offer it. Implications for the education of minority students who have an inadequate secondary education are discussed. The view that continuing and adult education is not the answer to declining enrollment in higher education is expressed. The trend toward accountability in higher education and the consequences of the growth in higher education institutions in the 1950's and 1960's and the subsequent decline in enrollments are also considered. (SW)

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LEADERSHIP AND RESPONSE

by

Paul Olum

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The University in a Changing Society:

Leadership and Response

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Let me begin with the question of the role of the university in providing "leadership" to a changing society. The notion is surely an appealing one, but I shall, nonetheless, take the position that, according to what I believe to be the intended interpretation of such leadership, this is not a proper mission of the university.

It is clear why the idea is so attractive. The world about us is in turmoil: social, political, economic, technological; the university is seen historically as the pre-eminent place for knowledge and wisdom and understanding on such subjects. What is more compelling, therefore, than the thought that the university should apply all of this expertise to the needs of our troubled, rapidly changing society?

Another way of expressing this is the common definition of the function of the university as threefold: teaching, research and service to society. It is a rare institutional executive indeed who has not uttered these words. Now, since no one doubts that teaching and fundamental research are themselves of enormous value to society, the trichotomy thus stated--if it has any force at all--must refer to a notion of service which is quite separate from and beyond these first two purposes. And when this "service" is elevated to the status of "leadership for society," it is clear that we are talking about something far different from the appropriate service provided by a state university when a public agency needs some technical data or information, or that rendered by a land grant institution through its extension and similar educational programs.

All of this came home very strongly to me when I was asked recently for a letter of reference by a large eastern university which was conducting a presidential search.

They wrote "we are seeking an individual who wants to lead,...to provide new and inventive ideas not only in education but to the larger society which is in need of refreshment and renewal"; and again "we want someone who believes that the university can have a material effect on the human condition."

Let me state my own position on this. It is that the university has a limited but transcendently important purpose: learning and teaching, scholarship and research, --and that is all of it.

The university has no business, I think, seeking to lead or change or improve the world except as it does so by the education and the new discoveries of its students and faculty. Note that it is important to keep a distinction here. In the massive effort to change society, to reform it to meet real human needs, all of us, students, faculty and administrators, as <u>private</u> individuals and just like other private individuals, should participate and serve with all the special skills and understanding and dedication we have to offer--and wherever and whenever we can. But the university itself should not--<u>as a university</u>--serve as a direct agent in this process.

Well, why not? With all the urgent need we see, why should we not respond to the cry of those dedicated, committed souls who want the university to step forward and lead the wandering people into the promised land? The central answer, I believe, lies in the desperate importance to the world of what the university <u>does</u> have to offer--its basic mission of an honest and objective search for truth and a dedication to teaching that truth. As a long range service to society this function is practical and useful beyond any conceivable measure, a source for the understanding and future growth of our world in directions we cannot now even imagine.

This is how we will bring "refreshment and renewal to the larger society," how we can best "have a material effect on the human condition." And this central mission is based on a philosophical commitment--a way of looking at things and doing things and of measuring the worth of what we are doing--which is incompatible with making the university also a direct instrument of social change. The moment we (as the university)

step out into the external world and try to produce a specified result there--at that moment we change our values, for we inevitably adopt the standards, the dependence on immediate measures of success and failure, the allocation of resources, the vulnerability to public taste or to social or political pressure, which are appropriate for a General Motors or for a Department of Commerce, but not for a university.

Now if you accept this argument (and, of course, even if you don't) there still remains the other half of our subject, namely the discussion of the extent to which our basic functions, those of teaching and scholarship, ought to respond, in a reasonably direct sense, to the needs of our changing society. Here is where the matter seems to me considerably more subtle, and I think the answer must be one of drawing lines, often difficult and delicate lines, and not one of categorical assertions.

The battle over the basic principle of the university's responsiveness to social change was fought and decided long ago. As late as 1867 Harvard's curriculum was devoted over 50% to the classics, with the occasional inclusion of a lecture on a historical topic, but with not even that much for contemporary literature or the sciences. But as science and technology grew, as the world became more complex (especially under the pressure of the industrial revolution), as others than the children of the social and economic elite sought the advantages of a college education, all of this changed. Engineering, chemistry, economics, psychology and a wide range of "practical" subjects entered the curriculum, and today the university includes business administration and journalism among its course programs.

This point of view was enshrined in legislation when the Morrill Act of 1862 provided for the endowment of colleges to teach "agriculture and the mechanic arts" to promote "the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes." The principle is surely established: the universities and colleges of the country provide <u>both</u> the liberal arts academic tradition of humanistic (as well as pure scientific) learning, aimed at disciplining and broadening the mind, <u>and</u> the professional training of practical and applied subjects. Furthermore, by extension of the spirit of the Morrill

Act, we have responded in another way to social change by recognizing the special educational needs of minority students so as to provide both economic opportunities and intellectual leadership for minority communities.

Nonetheless, I would argue that the same principle stated above at the beginning of these remarks ought still to apply and that educational lines must be drawn which are consistent with the proper role of a university, namely, teaching and learning, scholarship and research. A university ought not to be a trade school teaching practical routines at a junior high level (badly as these may be needed); it ought not to shoulder the task of teaching its students how to negotiate the ordinary vicissitudes of life with courses on maintaining a marriage or managing family finances or acquiring good eating and living habits to avoid cancer and heart disease.

The opposite view is held and urged on us by many people of good will and honorable motives, each with his or her own area of special concern, namely that where society has some urgent need we in the university should respond and provide for it in our curriculum. But I do not agree. The fact that society requires some skill or training does not mean automatically that the university must serve society and offer it. Other institutions exist or can be created for such purposes. The university must do what it can do that is compatible with its commitment as an institution of higher learning and with a faculty chosen for its dedication to research and scholarship and the teaching of this higher learning.

This does not mean that the university can not change; indeed it must, and much of the change in what and how we teach may well arise from the pressure of changing intellectual needs in society. We have already remarked above on the enormous changes which have occurred under this impetus in the past century. But the change must take place within the framework set by this basic purpose of the university.

Can we set a criterion for those situations where the university should respond to a perceived need in society and, for example, include necessary new material in its

course offerings? I think so. We should respond, it seems to me, wherever the subject matter to be taught and studied is at an intellectual level of depth and significance appropriate to a university. This sounds like a circular definition, but I do not believe it is. We know historically the demands of understanding and knowledge, of analytical and synthetic ability, made by university courses. The criterion says that the subject matter can be whatever the need requires, but the academic level and quality must be the ones we have always maintained. With this definition there is then no question about the propriety of including chemical engineering and architecture and accounting, since all of them, properly understood, can involve a level of understanding, a depth of ideas and a point of view, which make sense in the university setting.

However, this does leave us, as I indicated earlier, with the need to draw lines and to make some difficult decisions. I would be willing to discuss in this vein our physical education requirements or ROTC programs or the inclusion in some institutions of schools like hotel administration. But let me turn instead to a much more sensitive issue which will then provide a more honest test of what is being said here.

Far more serious and painful--because they are so much more emotionally appealing--are questions concerning minority education and open admissions. For example, there is a demand that--in response to a compelling social need--we admit groups of students many of whom are totally unable to cope with a collegiate level education and that, consequently, we then change the education we offer to fit their real needs--or, often in fact, their desires.

I have already referred above to our recognition of the special importance of educating minority students and to the significant contribution this education can make to the future of minority communities. But the question is, how far do we go?

If there is evidence that a minority student has the academic ability to make it in a regular university program and can profit from the skills and learning such a curriculum has to offer, then we should admit that student even if there will be a need to provide some remedial help at the beginning to overcome the deficiencies of an inadequate secondary education. At the University of Oregon we have just such a program,

supervised by a Council for Minority Education, which offers, among other things, special introductory courses in mathematics and English composition. But the whole goal is to get the student, with some help at the beginning, into the regular course sequences which provide a high level of academic and technical and professional skills. To provide such assistance seems to me wholly appropriate, where it is needed, because it serves the central purpose of a university education. On the other hand, to admit large groups of students who cannot profit from what we have to offer in a proper university curriculum, out of our own sense of either guilt of social obligation, is to do neither the students nor the university a service. There exist other institutions much better suited to meet their needs and the level of their abilities. And the door need never be closed; if such a student goes, say, to a community college and later on demonstrates the interest and ability to handle work at the university, we should, of course, welcome that student with enthusiasm.

Let me, in connection with this general issue of the university's response to minority students, quote a passage from what I believe to be an extremely important article written by the historian Eugene Genovese in the Atlantic Monthly in June of the year of academic turmoil 1969. The piece was entitled "Black Studies: Trouble Ahead," and he writes:

> "If not enough black students are equipped to enter college today, it is because of atrocious conditions in lower education. The universities can take a few steps to correct this injustice, but the real fight must take place elsewhere in society and must be aimed at providing black communities with the financial resources, independence and autonomy necessary to educate their people properly from the earliest appropriate ages. There are limits to what a particular institution like a university can do, and it dare not try to solve problems that can be solved only by the political institutions of society as a whole. And above all, no university need surrender its

> historical role and essential content in order to right the wrongs of the whole political and social system; it need only reform itself to contribute to a solution of the broader problems in a manner consistent with its character as a place of higher learning with limited functions, possibilities and responsibilities."

To me, the statement which is crucial for our discussion in the quotation above from Genovese is the one: "And above all, no university need surrender its historical role and essential content in order to right the wrongs of the whole political and social system." It is this essentially conservative principle which must govern our response to the needs of a changing society. It is curious to find it stated by a man, Genovese, who is a leading Marxist historian.

We have just discussed, at some length, one particular example of a serious issue raised for us by social change, namely the problem of minority education. There are many others, of course, and it seems to me important to look at such examples. Abstract principles are very attractive and on the whole pleasant to talk about, but understanding of consequences depends on looking at particular cases. I do believe that the principles and criteria we have discussed will give us some basis for making decisions about these matters, but every issue has, in addition, its own special problems, and I do not by any means suggest that all of this will suddenly become clear and simple.

Let us look briefly at a few central issues:

1. Continuing and adult education. There are many people, and among them administrators of leading institutions, who think that this is the great wave of the future in university education. Faced with declining enrollments as the 18-25 age group shrinks in size, the prospect of courses and whole curricular programs aimed at consumers other than the standard 4-year college undergraduate seems not only an exciting idea, but a source of financial salvation as well. It is claimed that a huge demand is out there waiting to be met, fueled by the new leisure, by better health to an older age, by

the need for training in new technical skills and by the general desire to comprehend better our increasingly more complex world. Maybe, but I'm skeptical. I have no statistics, mostly just anecdotal information from talking to a number of people, but I'm not convinced that there is nearly so much academic interest as people think there is at a level appropriate to a university.

It's that last part that's the rub. There is indeed a large demand, but most of it is for leisure time or hobby or recreational activities, or for courses well below the university level. Of course, the other exists too, in reasonable measure, and to the extent that the need is one which we can appropriately fill, we should certainly do so. In major urban areas the clientele may even be quite large, especially for technical subjects like electronics and computer science and statistics. But in general the interest is for things which community colleges are far better suited to provide, and we should not be competing with them. Actually, most of us do do some of this anyhow, hiring adjunct faculty for the purpose, or making available jobs for our graduate students, and a modest amount of it is a good thing for the community and probably does us no harm. But to plan on a massive effort in continuing education at a level which has nothing to do with the real function of a university, or with the talents and abilities of its faculty, is to embark on a foolish and dangerous course which can, in the long run, only be destructive of our purpose.

2. Demographic changes. Among the significant changes in society to which we must respond, whether we like it or not, are changes in the population and in its age distribution. As the college age population grew rapidly in the fifties and sixties new state universities complete with graduate programs and Ph.D.'s sprang up everywhere. States which had had one major graduate research institution suddenly had three or four or five, plus a number of new four year colleges.

Now in the late seventies, and for the foreseeable future, the population bulge has passed us by and enrollments are dropping, especially in graduate programs where some areas like the humanities are rapidly reaching the disaster stage. Coupled with

severe inflation, tax revolts and considerable public disenchantment with higher education, this means that there is neither the funding nor the enrollment to support all of these institutions, in particular the public ones. How do we respond to this change?

Well, if we try to spread the available funds and students around among all the institutions (say, in a given state) we are pretty sure to end up eventually with a large number of mediocre schools rather than one or two of real excellence. It is easy to say then that, if we want to retain the commitment to the highest quality of scholarship and learning, what we ought to do is run the picture of the fifties and sixties backwards and undo much of what was created, ending up with a considerably smaller number of institutions. And I do, indeed, believe that this is the proper answer. But it is equally clear that there isn't a chance on earth of doing any such thing. As has been said, there are some problems without solutions. This is probably one.

Our best response is probably to start from where we are, remember as well as we can the real goals and purposes and mission of the university, and try at every turn to preserve the strength we have. This means in particular resisting every effort to cheapen the university in order to make it sell better in the marketplace.

3. Accountability. I suppose that this could be phrased as "What is it that we are being paid for and how do we show that we are worth it?" This demand for accountability has become a powerfully strong and insistent theme in recent years. It runs through society in general, but it has special sub-themes for us which involve questions of tenure, of teaching versus research, of workloads, of job descriptions, of evaluations of faculty performance, etc. It is, after all, not an unreasonable concern of those who pay our salaries. How do we respond?

Well, the subject is much too big for the time available, so let me limit myself here to just a few words about the first part of the question phrased above, that is, "What is it that we are being paid for?"

The difficulty in discussing this is that there is so little understanding of what a university really is. Some university people act as though the truth is too dangerous to be let known and we should cover up by rendering lip service, or even actual service, to conventional expectations. I think that is a bad mistake.

When I was being interviewed as a candidate for my present position, the president of student government showed up, accompanied by an entourage of campus followers, and indicated that he had one single, but very important, question to ask of me. Studies had shown, he said, that faculty members were devoting, on the average, 40% of their time to research, and yet they were being paid 100% out of the "instructional" budget. If I came to the university, what would I propose to do about that? I answered that I would change the name of the budget.

I explained that I did not mean my response to be flippant, that I really believed that the salaries paid to faculty were for all the things they did, their teaching, their research, their intellectual leadership, their role in attracting other scholars and so on, and that it was important we recognize this. I argued that if we did it his way and had our faculty devote its full time solely to teaching, we would in just a few years change the university into one that he would not go to. Indeed it was easy to prove this--for many such institutions exist and he chose to come to this one, not to the others.

I do not think we need to respond to the pressures on us by undermining the best values of the university. Let me commit here what may seem the ultimate modern heresy and say that I deplore altogether the excessive emphasis placed on the primacy of teaching in the university today. Let us be really accountable and declare that for the university to fulfill its basic, limited, but terribly important mission, the first thing it must do is be sure that its faculty is made up of first-rate scholars, people of real expertise in their fields. But I would go further and offer my belief, one I hold quite passionately, that this is ultimately the only way to get truly great teaching at all of the levels, undergraduate, graduate, postdoctoral, appropriate to a university. I have no illusion that every great scholar is a great teacher, but

outstanding teaching is an emergent quality of an outstanding academic department, because only such a department can attract the best, the most exciting young minds of the country, and they will in the long run provide, as nothing else can, the best of teaching.

As I indicated earlier, there are many other related issues of our accountability for what we do, and we could discuss them in the same vein. But I will stop here, for the central argument is surely clear. It is that the traditional role of the university as a place of research and scholarship and of the higher learning and teaching is a vitally important one and worth preserving and defending. The university will change, of course, and respond to developing needs in society, but the greatest service it can offer to society is the continued fulfillment of its historic mission.